

The Common Vision: Parenting and Educating for Wholeness by David Marshak

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1

A COMMON VISION OF WHOLENESS

Three Visionary Teachers

For three men born into profoundly different cultures, Rudolf Steiner, Aurobindo Ghose, and Inayat Khan shared a strikingly related set of life circumstances and experiences.

- Rudolf Steiner was born in 1861 on the border of Austria and Hungary. Aurobindo Ghose was born in 1872, and Inayat Khan in 1882, both in India. Despite the differences in their years of birth, each of these men taught and published his major work at essentially the same time: from 1910 to 1924.
- Each of these men began his spiritual journey within a world religion, yet each rejected the exclusive claims to truth of that religious tradition. Instead each teacher synthesized the core truths of his religion of origin both with other spiritual traditions and with his own spiritual insight.

Steiner, born and raised within the nineteenth-century German culture, articulated teachings that related a Germanic Christianity, influenced by an explicit recognition of its roots in Teutonic paganism, to theosophy, a modern spiritual movement that found its primary sources in Hinduism. Steiner was also very familiar with the Western science of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and brought its influence into his work as well. Aurobindo's teachings created a synthesis that drew on the Hinduism of his native India as well as an intimate understanding of European culture and its "religion" of science, which he had gained from the fourteen years he studied in England. Inayat Khan's influences included his family religion of Islam, his knowledge of Hinduism, his spiritual training in Sufism, and his years of experience as a spiritual teacher in the United States and Europe.

- In an era when communication and transportation technologies had not yet brought the many lands of this planet into their present proximity, each of these three men had a profound understanding of the cultures of both the West and the East. Each of them carried elements of Western and Eastern traditions into his teachings and joined these elements with his own personal knowing to create a vision that was both a synthesis of East and West and the expression of his own spiritual intuition. In a profound way, each of these men brought together East and West in his life and in his teachings.
- Their public lives all ended at essentially the same time. Steiner died in 1924, Inayat Khan in 1926. While Aurobindo lived until 1950 and communicated with his disciples through letters and appeared before them four times each year, he withdrew from public teaching after his "day of Siddhi" in 1926.

During the past two centuries, many spiritual teachers have talked and written about the nature of human beings. Yet only Inayat Khan, Steiner, and Aurobindo have informed this discussion with detailed descriptions of both the process of human becoming in childhood and youth and the desired functions of child raising and education. And these three men have given us essentially the same vision of human unfoldment within the same coevolutionary context, at the very same historical moment. (One other person, a doctor and educator, not a spiritual teacher, has offered a strikingly related vision: Maria Montessori.¹)

The Common Vision: A Guide to Coevolution

The teachings of Rudolf Steiner, Aurobindo Ghose, and Inayat Khan concerning human nature, human becoming from birth through age twenty-one, and the purpose and practice of child raising and education display a remarkable coherence. While these teachings are not identical, they are profoundly similar and congruent. As noted before and detailed in Chapter Two, each vision arises from a different cultural experience, different religious roots, a different mystical tradition and practice, and the personal genius and spiritual unfoldment of a different human being. Yet the larger designs of these three systems of knowledge constitute what is essentially a single music, and the great majority of the details play as notes that are identical to each other or in harmony.

There are differences among the three teachers' descriptions. Many of these differences are linguistic, but some are substantive. Other apparent differences are not disagreements at all but are descriptions offered by one teacher about issues or aspects not discussed by the other(s). Even with this complexity, there is no question that these three bodies of knowledge are describing essentially the same understanding of the universe and of the place of human beings within it. They constitute a *common vision* of human nature and human becoming from birth through age twenty-one that is holistic and integrative. This *common vision* includes and validates the learnings of the twentieth century developmental psychologies, particularly the work of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson and their academic descendants, but extends far beyond them in scope.

Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan also share a profound understanding of the evolutionary crisis that we have entered in "modern" culture. Each of them offers his teachings about human becoming, child raising, and education as a guide to coevolution, to our conscious participation in the evolutionary process, to our resolution of our current paradoxical crisis.

A Common Vision of Human Nature

According to Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan, the most fundamental nature of human beings is that we are complex systems of energy that include several interpenetrated and interrelated sub-systems. One—and only one—of these sub-systems consists of energy in the form of matter. The others are purely energetic. Each sub-system exists largely but not exclusively on a different plane of being. The various planes of being are simultaneously separate and integral and range from the lowest plane, matter, to the highest plane, spirit. Each human sub-system is connected to and affected by every other sub-system. Thus, we are profoundly interdependent among all of our parts and with all other energies with which we interact.

Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan differ somewhat in their identification and description of the various sub-systems of the person and their corresponding planes of being, as described in Chapter Two. Yet the common center that is shared by each of their descriptions of the human being is clear:

- **A physical being that exists on the material plane.** This being is the body of matter. It includes the vehicles of the five physical senses, the breathing and circulation systems, the digestive organs, and the trunk and limbs. The physical body also includes the body consciousness, the

awareness that emerges purely from the physical body.

- **A life-force being that exists on the next higher plane, the plane of life-force or vital energies.** The life-force being exists on a plane of subtle energy that is of a higher and finer vibration than matter. This being consists of subtle energy that animates matter into the form of life. In the course of evolution, the life-force energy first manifested in plants, then in animals, and then in humans. It is part of what connects us with all other forms of life.
- **A mind or mental being that exists on the next higher plane.** The mental being operates on the next higher plane of being and includes the memory; the element of mind that receives sensory data and translates these data into thought forms; the element of mind that apprehends vibrations from higher planes and translates them into images; and the intellect, the seat of reason.
- **A spiritual being that exists on still higher planes.** Each person includes two levels of spiritual being. These levels of spiritual being embody the divine energy within the human person. It is this spiritual being that motivates personal unfoldment and the evolution of the individual—and the species.

In addition, both Aurobindo and Inayat Khan describe the ego as the false sense of self created in early childhood when the spiritual self identifies with the physical, life-force, and mental beings. The ego is illusory and distorted in relation to the spiritual being, yet it is a necessary step in the unfoldment of the person. The ego is required for survival until the spiritual being can unfold and establish itself within the consciousness. (Steiner does not mention the ego or anything like it.)

Finally Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan concur that life on this planet is engaged in a process of evolution that is the unfoldment of spiritual energies that have previously been involved in lower levels of being. Humans are partially divine beings who are evolving toward greater divinity. All three teachers describe the task of human beings as the attainment of divinity or God-realization. Aurobindo and Inayat Khan note that humans are transitional beings within the evolutionary process like all others before us: when we have fulfilled our potential, the next level of beings will emerge from us and continue to evolve.

Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan agree that the individual spiritual being is what experiences evolution. Steiner and Aurobindo describe the mechanism of this evolution as the reincarnation of spiritual beings. Inayat Khan both differs and agrees. He explains that each spiritual being or, in his terms, each soul, incarnates only once but can evolve in that incarnation. Then, as it returns to the spiritual plane, the soul leaves its impression on souls that are moving down to incarnate. This transmission is the mechanism of evolution that he describes in some of his writings. Yet paradoxically he notes elsewhere in his teachings that reincarnation is indeed a fact.

A Common Vision of Human Unfoldment: Birth to Age Twenty-One

In the broad outlines of their visions of human becoming from birth through age twenty-one, Rudolf Steiner, Aurobindo Ghose, and Inayat Khan share an even greater agreement than they do in their descriptions of human nature. While each spiritual teacher brings a distinct flavor to his descriptions, the details of these visions coincide to the extent that there are only a few important points of disagreement among them. Even these are more differences in emphasis than any sort of direct contradictions. Their common vision of human becoming from birth through age twenty-one includes these elements:

- The process of human becoming from birth through age twenty-one is an unfoldment of

inherent potentials that require proper nurture if the young person's nature is to evolve to the extent of its capacities. Thus, what is central in determining the becoming of the young person is her nature and her nurture in relationship to each other.

- Each child and youth is an organismic whole who contains within herself her own innate wisdom and motive force, her own *inner teacher*, to guide and power her unfoldment. This wisdom and motive force direct the child to unfold in a direction and at a pace that are appropriate for her development, if she is not coerced or compelled from them by adults.
- The unfoldment of the child and youth follows a course that is relatively consistent, regular, and foreseeable in its large outlines. Yet each individual unfolds at her own pace, which results in wide variations in the particular age when any given child experiences any particular step in her unfoldment; this process of unfoldment includes three major eras, each of about seven years in length:
 - a. Birth through 6 years of age
 - b. 6 through 12–14 years of age
 - c. 12–14 through 21 years of age

What follows, drawn in broad strokes, is the *common vision* of human becoming between birth and age twenty-one described by Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan. Within the articulation of this vision, I have included the elements of unfoldment and the needs for growth on which all three teachers agree. I have also brought in those elements and needs that any one of them describes, as long as they add detail to the *common vision* and are not contradicted by the writings of the other teachers.

THE FIRST ERA: BIRTH THROUGH 6 YEARS

In the first era, the child needs to direct her own activity as much as possible. She knows her experience as play, which is purposive to her. While her activity is more rewarding in its process than in its outcome, she needs the opportunity to experience a sense of completion about whatever she begins when she seeks such closure. She also needs to learn to satisfy her own needs as is appropriate to her age. The child who is free to direct her own activity will inevitably act in this way, for her inner wisdom will lead her to choose activities that meet her immediate growth needs.

In these years the child learns primarily by imitation. She perceives whatever is in her environment, including its physical, emotional, moral, mental, and spiritual aspects, and imitates these examples. As she learns through imitation, she does not gain from being taught rules or abstractions. What serves her unfoldment best is the provision of good examples that she can imitate: adults who are engaged in their own ongoing growth and who manifest truth-making, order, and spiritual opening as well as a calm and patient consistency in their behavior toward the child.

The young child also needs love, affection, support, and care of a high quality. When the child receives such nurturance, she experiences an interwoven happiness and trust and gains confidence in the fundamental goodness of life. This confidence evokes an inner joy and relaxation that provide her with even more nurturance.

The child needs to experience awe and reverence and to learn a feeling of gratitude toward the spiritual world for the wonders of the universe. She can best gain these experiences by participating with adults in rituals that evoke these feelings in the adults. The child will then learn them through her imitation of the adults' emotional and spiritual experience.

The first part of this era extends through the first two and half years of the child's life, when she belongs in the family. Each of these years has a powerful effect on the child's becoming, but all three teachers stress the critical importance of the first year in particular. While Aurobindo and Steiner describe the significance of the examples the child has in this year, Inayat

Khan details the mechanism through which these examples influence the infant. At birth, Khan explains, the infant's soul, her spiritual being, is unfinished, like a photographic negative not yet exposed to light. The impressions that the child receives in her first year from her parents influence the completion of her spiritual being, either for the good or not.

In these years the child's primary growth tasks include learning to crawl, to stand and walk, and to speak and think. All of these tasks involve the exercise of her will, which must be allowed as much expression as possible without restriction from adults. The more the child can express her will in these years, Inayat Khan, Aurobindo, and Steiner strongly agree, the more powerful and spiritually open she will be later on.

Both Steiner and Inayat Khan note that the child's cutting of her first teeth is the outward manifestation of the initial unfoldment of her thinking.

In her third year the child first gains a sense of herself as a separate person, when what Aurobindo and Inayat Khan call the ego, the false sense of self, develops. Once her ego has evolved into consciousness, the child moves into the second part of this era, from about two and a half years of age into her seventh year.

In these years the child needs to experience what Inayat Khan calls "kingship": the freedom to follow her own initiative, and the absence of worry, anxiety, competition, and ambition. While the child benefits from experiencing social contexts beyond the family part of the time, she needs such contexts to be as free of competition and conflict as possible.

Steiner and Inayat Khan both specifically note the child's need for environments that allow unchecked movement and initiative, that encourage the child's fancy and imagination. She needs not to be directed to the learning of numbers or language but to be allowed to play according to her own inclination. The child's play is the expression of her spiritual being. The more she is allowed to express her spiritual being freely, the more she can evolve spiritually as she unfolds. The more she is directed into the learning of symbols in these years, the shallower and more materialistic she will become in later life.

The child also needs environments and playthings that are incomplete and open-ended. Such environments and toys require her to engage her imagination in completing them.

The child continues to learn primarily through the imitation of adults. She needs warmth and cheerfulness from adults as well as positive moral and spiritual examples. She also needs to learn from the example of nature, to be immersed in the rhythms and beauties of the natural world. In experiencing nature in this way, the child can discover another path that leads to awe, reverence, and gratitude. The more that the adults who guide her also experience these feelings in their own relationship with the natural world, the more the child will be open to learning from their example.

THE SECOND ERA: 6 THROUGH 12–14 YEARS

In her seventh year the child begins to move from the first era into the second. While she still lives within an ongoing stream of inner images and memories that are beyond her control, as part of this transition the child experiences a diminution of her will. Such an inner experience is confusing to the child. Before, she usually knew what she wanted to do; now she is sometimes lost, without motivation. This transformation often leads to inner conflict, expressed as restlessness or obstinacy. Only with her evolution into the second era of life can the child move through this conflict and confusion and enter a new quality of experience.

Steiner marks the beginning of the second era with the changing of the teeth, which is both a signal of and an element in the process of transformation. Aurobindo describes this transformation as the opening of the psychic being. Steiner teaches that this second era is primarily focused on the growth of the soul. Inayat Khan explains that with the beginning of this era, the child's inner conflict dissipates, and she grows calmer and more harmonious.

In this era the child learns best through joyous aesthetic activity: drawing, painting, music, dancing, movement, and so on. These years are a time when the child experiences compelling inner rhythms that she can best express through the arts. Yet the child does not benefit from any

kind of artistic training now. Rather, what she needs is the opportunity for free expression of her own initiative through color, shape, pattern, music, and rhythm. This initiative flows from her spiritual being. When it is manifested through aesthetic activity, its expression helps the spiritual being to evolve. The child also needs to experience a regular rhythm in the course of her daily life.

With the growth of the adult teeth, the child begins to think, though in a very concrete manner, because her thinking is still fused with her physical body. It comes alive as a largely imageic process that is strongly influenced by her emotions. The child also begins to unfold a capacity for moral understanding.

Now the child needs to learn to write and read her native language and to gain competence in the initial understandings and skills of mathematics. Yet in this learning, too, she can be most fully engaged through the use of rhythm as a method of teaching.

As the child learns through her senses, feelings, and imagination in these years, she needs to be spared from theories and other abstractions that have little meaning for her. Instead she needs to experience stories and pictures that convey aesthetic and moral values, that she can visualize and take within herself for guidance and enduring meaning. She has the capacity to learn profoundly from stories of great and wonderful personalities from myth and history. Such stories evoke inner imagery, grounded in feelings of reverence and veneration, and arouse a spirit of emulation in the child's spiritual being that aids the growth of her character and moral nature.

Steiner teaches that the child's most powerful learning in these years results from her discipleship to an adult: a teacher by necessity of what that role demands, not a parent. In this experience of discipleship, the child can revere and emulate this teacher. From this relationship she can also learn about the bounds of natural authority. Both Aurobindo and Inayat Khan note that the child needs to experience teachers who embody integrity and nobility of character. But they do not mention the kind of intense relationship with a single adult to which Steiner gives so much significance.

In this era the child needs to learn good habits and attitudes, particularly patience, endurance, and perseverance. She needs to be encouraged to wait when necessary and to bring what she begins to completion. She also needs to continue to develop her relationship with nature, as her direct experience of nature supports her intellectual and spiritual unfoldment.

By the time the child has entered this second era, she has lost the clarity of will that directed her younger activity. She rejects imitation as "babyish" and seeks guidance from adults.

In the first three years of this era, the child needs to build on the gratitude to the spiritual world that was evoked within her in the preceding years in two ways. She needs to learn the will to love: first feeling this caring for a revered adult(s), then expanding its range to others and to nature. She also needs to learn her first ideals: respect for elders and the joy that flows from giving respect; self-respect; a sense of duty; and her first feeling of the divine ideal. During these years the child can connect her feelings of reverence for the natural world with her ideal of the divine, bringing feeling to that ideal and expressing it as her first experiences of worship.

The child's feeling for rhythm and her need to experience the world through rhythm are most intense in these first years of the second era. Her awarenesses are sensual and imaginative. She wants to interact with that which is alive, plants and animals, and that which is full of life, stories and pictures.

In these years the child is also engaged in grounding herself: developing a sense of her place in the family, school, and peer group.

Finally the child's memory awakens with the changing of the teeth and needs to be cultivated on a regular basis through rhythms of movement, tables, and rhymes.

At nine years of age, the child may experience an intense yet unformulated and unarticulated questioning of her respect and reverence for her elders. She needs adults to respond to this questioning not with fear or anger but with openness and love. At this time the child may also experience a new intensity in her social needs, seeking to be with her peers more and placing more import in their acceptance of her.

At ten years of age, the child enters the second part of this era. She begins to differentiate herself more profoundly from the world around her and to take on patterns of individuality that will be with her for the rest of her life. In this eleventh year of her life and through the

remaining years of this era, she begins to discover what her strengths and proclivities are. She also has the potential to begin to discover her calling.

The child is very much open to knowledge in these years. She still can learn from stories of heroes and heroines, though the learning now takes place on a more complex level. She also begins to develop powers of concentration and needs to practice them through artistic and craft activities that require attention, patience, and coordination.

At eleven years of age, the child is ready to learn about cause and effect. Prior to this age, the less she interacts with this kind of reasoning, the richer the life of her spiritual being will be. Now she is ready to use her reason to observe cause and effect in the natural world and explore the relationships between them. She can also learn to classify, define, and discriminate what she perceives in nature.

At this age the child can extend her feeling for the divine and open to spiritual experience for the first time. Her feelings of wonder and awe for nature can take her beyond the boundaries of her physical being and bring her to a visceral awareness of the divine ideal both beyond and within herself. This kind of experience is an opening to the reality of spirit, though not the spiritual awakening to which she can come at the end of her youth. It is both a felt experience and a validation of spirit and an intimation of her potential for a more complete awakening later on.

In the last year or two of this era, the child's limbs and trunk begin to grow quickly. Her muscles enlarge and strengthen. She begins to develop an awareness of her sexual identity. What she needs now is not to be rushed into the world of adolescence but to be allowed to continue to unfold at her own pace.

THE THIRD ERA: 12–14 THROUGH 21 YEARS

The third era of childhood and youth begins with the onset of puberty and continues at least until age twenty-one. It is marked by dramatic growth and change in the physical body, which is the material aspect of a much larger transformation.

As this era begins, the youth starts to develop a more complete reason, which is dominated by independent, critical thought and the ability to work with abstraction. Her thinking is now based within her mind, not her emotion. She examines what lies around her with her growing but still inconsistent reason. She no longer accepts authority on its own terms but evaluates its validity, often choosing to question and challenge it.

The youth's inner life is vastly expanded as her thinking evolves. Both her new mode of thinking and her maturing feeling lead her to an increasingly larger awareness of herself and the world. As her inner life grows, the youth finds passion and delight in her ideas, much as the younger child experiences these feelings in her interaction with pictures and stories.

In these years the youth manifests her sexual characteristics and opens to sexuality and personal love. She also can experience the spiritual counterpart of personal love: a powerful caring for all living things expressed as an idealism bound up in imagination. As she learns about her own idealism, the youth both seeks people who share her values and continues to consider and explore her ideals to test their value to her as guides for her behavior.

The youth often experiences the third era, and particularly its first half, as a time of intense turmoil, struggle, and inner conflict. She gains the beginnings of adult comprehension and maturity but manifests these inconsistently. At times she is clear and responsible, at other times absent-minded, moody, and self-absorbed.

What the youth needs in these years is to explore both within—her feelings, passions, intuitions, thoughts, and questions—and without—her ideas and experiences and the people with whom she interacts. She needs the freedom to consider and think on her own, make her own decisions, experience their consequences, and learn from them. She also needs the help and support of adults who understand her inconstancy but who nonetheless respect her integrity and the demands of her unfoldment. The youth needs not criticism or repression from adults but support and appreciation of her positive qualities. She needs a consistent balance: firm and

constant support and supervision, with gradually increasing freedom and responsibility. The young person responds positively to adult leadership that respects her. The youth also needs the experience of adventure: to explore beyond the world of family and school and to gain new learnings and new relationships.

The third era is naturally a time of self-absorption. In response to this tendency, the youth needs to be helped gently to think and feel beyond herself. She needs to learn about how things work in the practical world and to discover the contributions that previous generations have made to her culture. As she experiences this learning about the past, she needs to be engaged in imagining what her generation can do to make the world a better place. The youth also needs to cultivate a receptive, in-taking attitude and to practice this regularly for short times to counter her natural imbalance between expression and receptivity.

In the first third of this era, the youth experiences an intense inconsistency over which she has little control. In the middle third, she begins to develop a center and needs to seek balance and increasing self-control. From fifteen years of age on, her major growth task is the development of her will, for it is the will that will direct and power her later spiritual awakening. She can work toward the unfoldment of her will through the practice of concentration and other will-related tasks.

In the final third of this era, the youth gains self-possession and clarity and finally becomes more of an adult than a child. In her twenty-first year, the young adult has the capacity to awaken to a conscious awareness of her spiritual being. This awakening brings her to an experience of the divine spirit within herself.

A Common Vision of Child Raising and Education

Since Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan articulate a *common vision* of human becoming, of course their visions of child raising and education bear the same overall coherence. The three teachers describe the same purposes for child raising and education, which include the following:

- Helping the child and youth to grow with appropriate love, support, and structure so she can unfold into responsible, centered freedom.
- Helping the child and youth to unfold to her potentials in her various beings or sub-systems and all of their faculties; helping her learn to harmonize and integrate her sub-systems so they can work together; and helping her to gain a knowledge of herself and her various beings and faculties.
- In particular, helping the child's and youth's spiritual being to unfold, so that it can manifest as her *inner teacher* and express its innate wisdom for guiding her growth; helping the child and youth to follow the calling of her *inner teacher* within her spiritual being, which will lead her to meet her developmental needs.
- Helping the child to learn about the human condition, the worlds within and without, and the profound unity and interdependence of all things.
- Helping the child to evolve both as an individual and as a social person, a member of her community, nation, and species.

Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan also articulate a profoundly similar set of principles to guide the practice of child raising and education. These principles are the following:

- The parent and teacher must apprehend the child and youth as a unified system, composed of physical, life-force, mental, and spiritual beings and their various aspects and faculties, existing on a path of life that includes the past, present, and future.

- The parent and teacher must provide the child and youth with both a safe environment and as much freedom as possible, so she can unfold according to her innate wisdom, her *inner teacher*. The parent and teacher must allow the child to unfold in tune with her own inner law, at her own pace.
- The primary external agent in the education of the child and youth is first the parent, then the teacher. It is the qualities of the parent and teacher that most affect the child and youth, not their skills or knowledge. The qualities that have the most positive impact on the child and youth are love and wisdom. Given this responsibility, the parent and the teacher must consciously attend to their own continuing unfoldment in an ongoing and consistent manner.
- The parent's and teacher's task is not to shape or mold the child and youth but to help, guide, and nurture her. The parent's and teacher's primary purpose is not to train the child and youth or impart knowledge but to help her learn to develop her own instruments, faculties, and capabilities. The parent and teacher also need to help the child and youth learn to recognize and validate her own inner knowing, her *inner teacher*.

These purposes and principles form the core of the *common vision* of child raising and education. When Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan move beyond them to discussions of educational methods, there is both a great deal of agreement and considerable variation in their prescriptions. Most of this variation arises not from disagreements among them but from differences in focus. Indeed, taken together, the three separate descriptions of appropriate methods for child raising and education offer a richer and more complete understanding of what these processes require than any of the single visions alone.

The one significant area of apparent disagreement among Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan in relation to educational practice is a critical one. It involves how the principle of providing the child with the freedom to heed her *inner teacher* is enacted in the school environment. Chapter Ten explores this apparent disagreement and clarifies it. In addition Chapter Ten considers the applications of this *common vision* of child raising and education in our families and schools today.